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Anti-ice task force may be in jeopardy

By Peter Boylan
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A law enforcement coalition that's taken a lead role in combating the "ice" epidemic in Hawai'i could be shut down if President Bush's proposed federal budget is approved by Congress, according to state and federal law enforcement officials.

Established in 1999, the Hawai'i High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area operates the most widespread narcotic intelligence network in the Pacific and targets the largest drug-trafficking organizations operating in Hawai'i.

"We have a pretty big (drug) problem here and we've been fairly successful dealing with it and it's largely thanks to HIDTA," said Charles Goodwin, special agent in charge of the FBI in Hawai'i. "The FBI today, with our reduction in drug resources, really relies on our coordination with HIDTA."

The partnership of federal, state and county agencies, which has an annual budget of about \$2.5 million, coordinates the drug enforcement activity of the four county police departments, the FBI, the federal Drug Enforcement Administration, the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, and nine other state, local and federal law enforcement agencies.

It utilizes more than 20 task forces that are staffed by 302 full- and part-time detectives, police officers and federal agents.

Last year, police and federal agents working under HIDTA seized 240 pounds of crystal methamphetamine, arrested 870 individuals and apprehended 446 fugitives. They seized 229 firearms and \$5.4 million in assets, including cash. In addition, HIDTA provided more than 35,224 hours of drug enforcement training for police and federal agents.

Bush's budget would eliminate a \$634 million grant program for state and local police departments and cut anti-drug spending in HIDTAs across the nation from \$226 million to \$100 million.

There are 28 HIDTAs in the United States and 33 intelligence centers, including one in Hawai'i, that are plugged into a nationwide network.

The reduction in funding across the board would mean a severe shortfall for a majority of the individual HIDTAs and threaten the survival of many, said Larry Burnett, HIDTA's director in Hawai'i.

"Because we are one of the newest and smallest, our very existence would be jeopardized," said Burnett. "I don't think we would survive the cuts."

Burnett did not have a specific dollar amount that would be cut from the local HIDTA budget under the proposal.

John Horton, associate deputy director for state and local affairs in the Office of National Drug Policy, said the administration takes the methamphetamine epidemic seriously, budget cuts notwithstanding.

"We've had to make some tough choices," Horton said. "If we had unlimited money, it would be different."

He said the administration's strategy focuses on working with law enforcement agencies in Asia to disrupt the illegal export of pseudoephedrine, one of the main ingredients in meth.

"We think that's where the meth market is particularly vulnerable," Horton said. "The most important thing we can do is to make sure the labs don't get set up in the first place."

In addition to the HIDTA cuts, Bush also proposes to reduce spending on a Justice Department methamphetamine initiative from \$52.6 million to \$20 million, a 60 percent cut.

Overall, Bush plans to spend \$12.4 billion on the drug war in fiscal 2006, a 2.2 percent increase over current funding. But most of the additional money is targeted toward intercepting drug shipments before they cross the border and international programs, such as crop eradication.

Bush's budget would:

- Eliminate grants to states under the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities program, funded at \$441 million this year.
- Eliminate grants to states under the National Alliance for Model State Drug Laws, an organization that has been instrumental in helping states draft legislative responses to the methamphetamine crisis.
- Eliminate Justice Assistance grants used to bolster multijurisdictional anti-drug task forces.

In Hawai'i, police and federal agents say that since Sept. 11, 2001, drug enforcement resources have been spread thin with the added responsibility of counter-terrorism and homeland security.

HIDTA has worked to maximize limited state and federal resources by coordinating efforts and adding federal funding, law enforcement officials say.

"HIDTA has been the most successful way to coordinate drug strategy. Over the last decade our most effective tool for combating drugs has been task forces," said Maui police Chief Thomas Phillips. "It's an organization that puts everybody at the table together. It is federal, state, and local (law enforcement) pooling intelligence resources and making decisions together."

HIDTA is managed and led by a multi-agency executive board comprising eight state and local law enforcement leaders, eight federal law enforcement leaders, and leaders from two additional agencies who serve in advisory, non-voting roles.

"We're all on equal footing," said Hawai'i county police Chief Lawrence Mahuna. "This funding issue is an issue that probably would have a negative impact on Hawai'i's drug enforcement efforts. We would lose a lot of coordination and communication."

The board meets at least once a month to determine the most serious regional drug threat, coordinate a strategy to counter that threat and evaluate task force performance. The majority of officers and agents

assigned to HIDTA work in the organization's sprawling set of offices in downtown Honolulu.

Said Burnett: "It really is the glue that binds and if you take that glue away, everything collapses. If this budget passes, all this dries up and goes away."

A position paper by the National Association of HIDTA directors questions the wisdom of the cuts and the reassigning of the groups to the Justice Department. The Bush administration proposal would also transfer the HIDTA program from the Office of National Drug Control Policy to the Department of Justice.

"The HIDTA executive boards and directors are opposed to this recommendation because it would virtually render the program ineffective and destroy the equal partnership (between state, local and federal law enforcement) by giving management and control to the federal government," the paper said.

The position paper also states that by transferring control of HIDTA to DOJ, it would remove the level playing field that makes HIDTA operations so successful.

"The primary reason for the success of the program is that it is within ONDCP's Bureau of State and Local Affairs, a neutral entity with no enforcement arm to compete or take control," the paper reads. "No personnel from ONDCP are members of the Executive Board. Thus, HIDTA provides for an equal partnership between federal, state and local law enforcement leaders tailored for a regional approach and goals yet tied to the national mission."

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